

The Dance: Works

By Mark Morris

It is not simply his cleverness that makes Mark Morris worth watching. This young choreographer is interesting because of his willingness to try out many styles. One never knew what to expect next when the Mark Morris Dance Group performed Friday night at the Bessie Schönberg Theater, 219 West 19th Street.

Some of Mr. Morris's most audacious ideas resulted in his best dances. He set "Handel Choruses" to four choral works. Whereas some choreographers would make Handel an excuse for striking ensembles, Mr. Morris devised four solos. Thanks to his gestural boldness, the massed choral sound never overwhelmed the individual dancers.

Susan Hadley cavorted to festive music. Penny Hutchinson reached out, as if into fog, to a chorus about thick darkness. Mr. Morris obsessively clutched at his body to a choral description of jealousy. And he was not afraid of spicing Handel with wit, for when an excerpt from the "Messiah" declared, "All we like sheep have gone astray," Keith Sabado wiggled with sheepish guilt.

"The Vacant Chair" was even stranger. This solo for Rob Besserer was set to three sentimental — even corny — songs. Nevertheless, they inspired a complex dance. To a song about death by George F. Root, Mr. Besserer, wearing a bag over his face, kept lunging powerfully downward. He removed the bag, but turned his back to the audience, during Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" and, through his arm movements, transformed himself into a growing tree. Finally, he staggered and thrashed. Yet he did it to Carrie J. Bond's sweet ditty, "When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day."

Mr. Besserer was masked for the first episode. He averted his face in the second and, in the last, his actions

appeared to contradict the song. Therefore, because Mr. Morris withheld facial expressions and, at one point, seemed to run counter to the music, the solo's emotional tone remained ambiguous. Occasional titters suggested that a few spectators found it a spoof. But Mr. Besserer's intensity made me suspect that Mr. Morris was being painfully sincere.

Two other works were pleasant diversions. "Marble Halls," an athletic ensemble to Bach, had 10 dancers kicking and running in the allegros and appearing to swim through space in the slow passages. "I Love You Dearly," a solo for Guillermo Resto to Rumanian folk songs, was filled with stampings and swings of the arms. Mr. Morris took care to make it resemble a folk dance by having Mr. Resto during one song begin all movements upstage and then, after each sequence, return there, each return serving as the kinetic equivalent of a new stanza in the song.

Not all Mr. Morris's ideas worked. "Minuet and Allegro in G" was a sometimes mincing, sometimes brusque, but always self-conscious, duet for Lodi McClellan and Jennifer Thienes. Equally labored in its facetiousness was "Love, You Have Won," in which Mr. Morris and Mr. Resto preened and postured like vain courtiers to a Vivaldi cantata.

Dancers paired off and joined together in "My Party." Although they all looked coy, one could not call their antics totally nonsensical. Mr. Morris had both heterosexual and homosexual couples embrace and no one on stage seemed shocked by anyone else. "My Party" may have been a trivial gathering. But it was also surely happening in utopia and in utopia, Mr. Morris implied, one had the freedom to be giddy.

Jack Anderson